



Controversies and Misunderstandings about Meaning: On the reception of Odgen and Richards' book, "The Meaning of Meaning"

Thierry Poibeau

► To cite this version:

Thierry Poibeau. Controversies and Misunderstandings about Meaning: On the reception of Odgen and Richards' book, "The Meaning of Meaning". International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (ICHOLS'2008), Sep 2008, Potsdam, Germany. hal-00347004

HAL Id: hal-00347004

<https://hal.science/hal-00347004>

Submitted on 19 Aug 2015

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Controversies and Misunderstandings about Meaning

On the reception of Ogden and Richards' book, *The Meaning of Meaning*

Thierry Poibeau
Laboratoire d'Informatique de Paris-Nord (UMR 7030)
CNRS and Université Paris 13

1 Introduction

The Meaning of Meaning is an influential book published by Charles Kay Ogden (1889–1957) and Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979) (from now on O&R) in January 1923. It describes a theory of meaning, more specifically trying to determine the nature of meaning and why misunderstandings frequently occur between people. Even if the book is now considered as “dated”¹, it has been intensively read, especially in the English speaking world² where it has been widely used as a textbook in

¹ According to the CTLF website (*Corpus de textes linguistiques fondamentaux*; the note concerning Ogden and Richard has been written by H. Portine — notice 5316, http://ctlf.ens-lsh.fr/n_fiche.asp?num=5316). The text says: « Cet ouvrage a joué un rôle important en philosophie du langage au cours de la première moitié du XXe siècle. En témoignent les nombreuses rééditions. Il est plutôt considéré de nos jours comme un événement important mais daté ».

² The complete title and the main editions before the second World War are the following:
The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the

semantics; the book is still much cited and raises problems which are wide open, like the notion of meaning itself, the relationships between words and objects, and communication problems. Therefore, it seems worth exploring why this book is still influential nowadays, as can be seen in various fields from computational linguistics to communication studies, *via* the Semantic Web.

In this article, we briefly present O&R' theory; we then look at the way it has been received right after its publication and more precisely we consider some of the criticisms made at the time, – especially by Wittgenstein (1889–1951) (O&R initially thought that their book was an answer to some of the philosophical problems raised by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, where the philosopher raised important questions related to semantics). In the last section, we see how some of the paradoxes emerging from O&R' theory are still vivid today, especially for the computational linguistics community.

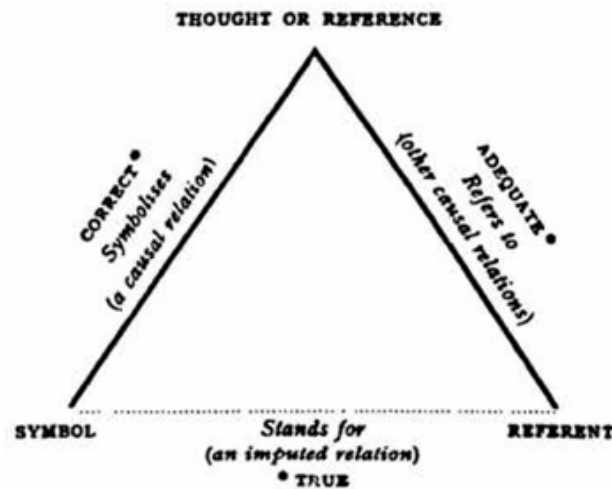
Science of Symbolism. Co-authored by C. K. Ogden and A.K. Richards. With an introduction by J. P. Postgate, and supplementary essays by Bronislaw Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', and F. G. Crookshank, 'The Importance of a Theory of Signs and a Critique of Language in the Study of Medicine'. London and New York, 1923. 1st: 1923 (Preface Date: Jan. 1923); 2nd: 1927 (Preface Date: June 1926); 3rd: 1930 (Preface Date: Jan. 1930); 4th: 1936 (Preface Date: May 1936); 5th: 1938 (Preface Date: June 1938); 8th: 1946 (Preface Date: May 1946); NY: 1989 (with a preface by Umberto Eco).

2 Ogden and Richards' theory abridged

From O&R' theory, people think words have a unique, precise meaning, which (according to them) is wrong. This error leads to misunderstandings. The authors then claim that we need to solve these problems to enhance understanding between people.

2.1 *The semiotic triangle*

The book is mainly focused on words. Words are considered as symbols that conventionally stand for objects of the world (*the referent*). This relation between a word and an object is made through the image of the object in the brain (*the reference*). Therefore, meaning depends from the relationships between the word (*the symbol*), the image in the brain (*the reference*) and the object in the world (*the referent*). The links between these three poles describe a triangle traditionally known as the “semiotic triangle”. In fact, there is no direct link between the word and the object, but the image of the object in the brain is a kind of mandatory go-between that introduces a personal and emotive dimension into meaning.



Note that this semiotic triangle is not new and has not been initially introduced by O&R. For example, comparable ideas are already present in Charles Pierce's (1839–1914) works; this is clearly mentioned as such in the appendix of O&R' book (p. 279). However, O&R popularized the semiotic triangle. The book will be largely studied in English speaking universities. It is still widely used and accepted as such, e.g. in communication departments.

2.2 *Emotive language*

According to O&R, people believe that every word has a precise, correct meaning. But in reality, meaning is largely driven by personal experience (words evoke different things or feelings, based on past experience), therefore, the same word means different things to different people. As a matter of fact, for O&R it is because of personal experience that people use words in such or such manner, which leads to misunderstandings.

O&R then propose a series of solutions to avoid misunderstandings. It is possible to reduce ambiguity by 1) Providing clear definitions (specify what

is included in the meaning of a given word); 2) Using metaphors (*idem*, especially for relations between words or notions); 3) Using “feedforward” (taking into account the user, his past and his expectations, as far as possible); and 4) Using Basic English (a reduced set of precise words used as primitives).

Concerning this last point, O&R think that it is possible to define a basic, controlled vocabulary insofar human feelings are excluded from this basic vocabulary (Ogden, 1930). The reduced vocabulary can be considered as a set of semantic primitives, and complex notions can be explained by combining these primitives. As we will see later on, this work received some echo from the Artificial Intelligence community since semantic primitives is a key component of any semantic analysis (especially Machine Translation that requires an *interlingua*, cf. Léon, 2007).

3 Reception of O&R’s work by Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein was a close colleague of O&R in Cambridge. Ogden translated Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* in 1921-1922, which mainly concerns meaning (it is in fact mainly F. Ramsey (1903–1930), then Ogden’s student in Cambridge, who did the work).

3.1 *Echoes between theories*

One of the key point of W's book (among many others) is to separate what can be said from what cannot be said (from a logical and philosophical point of view). Is meaningful only what corresponds to basic facts and logical deduction (therefore, philosophy has nothing to say about religion or aesthetics, which are based on personal beliefs). From this point of view, there are clearly some echoes between W.' theory and O&R's book.

Ogden thought that the *Meaning of Meaning* was an answer that could solve the problems raised in the *Tractatus*. For W. as well as for O&R, words correspond to objects, relations express connections between objects and the language reflects the structure of the world. Meaning is related to a proper analysis of relations between basic objects of the world and logical deductions from these relations. O&R just add the problem of personal experience (the *emotive language*).

Moreover, both books claim to have a *therapeutic* function. Wittgenstein wants to cure philosophy from false problems (problems that cannot be solved by logical deductions from basic facts, cf. religion, aesthetics) whereas O&R want to cure communications from misunderstandings. They both propose solutions to solve this problem.

3.2 Wittgenstein's reaction

Given the echoes between these books, Ogden believed that the *Meaning of Meaning* went some way towards providing a causal solution to the problem of meaning as outlined in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein then felt obliged to give an appraisal of the book, and he answered frankly that in his view, Ogden had not entirely grasped the problems which he had tackled in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1973: 69).

In a letter to Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) on 7 April 1923, he went further on the subject of *The Meaning of Meaning*: “Is it not a miserable book?! Philosophy is not as easy as that! The worst thing is the introduction of Professor Postgate Litt. D. F. B. A. etc. etc. I have seldom read anything so foolish.” (Monk, 1991: 214).

Why this reaction from Wittgenstein? No clear and explicit reason explains the reaction from Wittgenstein. As far as we know, Wittgenstein himself never wrote an explicit and sound critic of O&R's book. However, different elements may be meaningful.

Some authors, among others Jerzy Perzanowski (1993), suggest that W. defends a radically different philosophical point of view than the one expressed by O&R, even if Ogden did not see the point in 1923. As explained by Perzanowski, in the *Tractatus*, W. establishes a direct connection between words and objects, thus defending direct reference. Of course, if one takes this interpretation for granted, there is a huge mismatch

between O&R and Wittgenstein's theory, since O&R write, concerning direct reference: "*Such shorthands as the word 'means' is constantly used so as to imply a direct simple relation between words and things, phrases and situations. If such relations could be admitted, then there would be of course no problem as to the nature of Meaning, and the vast majority of those who have been concerned with it would have been right in their refusal to discuss it. But too many interesting developments have been occurring in sciences (...) for any naive theory that 'meaning' is just 'meaning' to be popular at the moment*". (*The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 13).

3.3 *The Meaning of Meaning*, a "so foolish" book?

In 1923, for Wittgenstein, emotive language is for sure not a philosophical question. We should note, however, the so-called "second" W. (after his return to Cambridge in 1929) will develop a quite different theory. The later W. defends the position that words are not directly connected to objects in the world (and the structure of a language does not directly correspond to the structure of the world). Instead, the meaning of a word corresponds to its use, and context is highly relevant for meaning.

But the most obvious explanation for W. negative reaction is probably that the aim of the two books is just different. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is only interested in logic and philosophy (and not in communication). The *Tractatus* only concerns philosophy, thus emotive language is not a point addressed by Wittgenstein, nor does *The Meaning of Meaning* gives any

new insight to the philosophical problems addressed by Wittgenstein. The fact that the two books do not concern the same range of matters may explain W.'s reaction: "*Philosophy is not as easy as that!*" (Monk, 1991: 214).

4 Why is *The Meaning of Meaning* still influential today?

If one believes in O&R's theory, it seems possible to define a language (or an *interlingua*), made of unambiguous meanings (a.k.a. semantic primitives), provided that the emotive dimension of language is excluded. In this perspective, the book from O&R is the source of two kinds of applications:

- The definition of an unambiguous language for enhanced (human) communication
- The definition of an unambiguous language for computer-based applications (especially in Artificial Intelligence).

Ogden himself developed the Basic English in the 1930s, as aforementioned. This project was aimed at enhancing human communication by the definition of words from sets of unambiguous primitives.

Beyond human communication, the question of semantic primitives is a classical problem of Artificial intelligence (AI), especially for Machine Translation. In this field, the key point is to define the semantics of words

(or phrases) so that the best equivalent in the target language can be found³. To go ahead with a precise example, we will take a look at the CLRU (*Cambridge Language Research Unit*). Among the numerous teams that have been interested in Machine Translation, the CLRU is especially important: this group was a prototypical example of research in the domain in the 1950s. Created in Cambridge (UK) in 1955, the CLRU was a small research unit interested in Machine Translation. It was directed by Margaret Masterman (1910–1986), a former student of Wittgenstein. Masterman largely acknowledged her inspiration from Wittgenstein, but only from the second Wittgenstein (Masterman, 2005). She regularly mixed in Cambridge with scholars like Ivor A. Richards, the co-author of the *Meaning of Meaning*; following this tradition, she insisted on the importance of semantics rather than syntax for Machine Translation, which makes her approach highly original (see Léon, 2000).

Some years before (in the 1930s and 1940s), as we have seen in the previous

³ For the Semantic Web, the main goal is to allow computers to communicate between them, using unambiguous identifiers corresponding to objects and relations. These identifiers are then supposed to be mapped to chunks of texts, so that ambiguous natural language texts can be formalized using an unambiguous corresponding formalism expressing their content. Though, references to O&R are very frequent in the Semantic Web community, since this project is very close to the one of O&R (one can draw a parallel between the Basic English and the project of the Semantic Web, cf. Buitelaar *et al.*, 2005 to take a recent example among many others).

section, several considerations, among other the fact that literal meaning does not correspond to meaning as such, pushed Wittgenstein back to philosophy. W. then developed a complex philosophical investigation of language (Wittgenstein, 1953). This investigation did not include the emotive language of O&R as such but W. introduced the idea of language games, that is to say the fact that context and situations have an impact on meaning⁴. The change is radical compared to the *Tractatus* where is defended the idea of direct reference, that is to say a direct correspondence between the language and the world. In the *Investigations*, W. strongly advocates a situation-based conception of meaning, which had a prominent influence on Masterman. To be more precise, the second W. defends the notion of language use and language game and gives emphasis to perceptions, feelings and situations. So, from a O&R' perspective, the second W. philosophy, in a way, integrates emotional language. However, W. did not make any reference to O&R' theory. Moreover, there is still (from W.'s point of view) one fundamental flaw in O&R' theory: no unambiguous language can be defined, since ambiguity is an inherent part of any language.

Taking inspiration from this tradition, in the 1950s, like most other AI groups, the CLRU was torn between two opposite conceptions: 1) the

⁴ The slogan "you shall know a word by the company its keeps", later introduced by Firth (1957:11) takes his inspiration from the same observations as the one made by W.

necessity to find an *interlingua* for machine translation, based on a set of linguistic primitive (semantic correspondences between languages); 2) the fact that words do not have a clear, precise meaning but are ambiguous and depend from the way they are used in *language games* (i.e. depends on experience and, more generally, on the context). The first conception is the one defended by W. in the *Tractatus*, the second one in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Masterman was largely influenced by this last position.

However, the CLRU's interest for semantic primitives, forming a kind of language game, is closer to the first position rather than to the second one. Y. Wilks (1939–), a former student of Masterman and the editor of a book gathering her most important works (Masterman, 2005) stresses that Masterman was highly influenced by the stick pictures of the language books, seen as a product of W's "forms of life" (Masterman, 2005, p. 215). As a matter of fact, Basic English can be seen as a practical experiment in W's language games (moreover, Masterman will develop a similar approach to the one from Ogden, using Chinese characters as primitives instead of English words, under the influence of M.A.K. Halliday (1925–), then a reader in Chinese in Cambridge). The contradiction between a static unambiguous conception of meaning and a dynamic, situation-based alternative one is here apparent. In a recent paper, Wilks suggests that the contradiction can be solved if one postulates a non logical but practical and empirical approach to semantic primitives. According to him, primitives can be organised as to form a language, but this language, like every human

language, remains ambiguous. However, each primitive from this language subsumes sets of words, thus forming a semi-formal language, which is half way between human languages and formal approaches, especially formal ontologies. By stacking such representation levels, we may obtain a compatible abstract representation of complex domains.

It is not clear whether this approach can solve the problem. Wilks observes that the web is a sea of text and has expanded without any major problem. Wilks (2006) assumes that a series of applications and domains will progressively be formalized using this “not so formal” approach. An increasing part of the world will thus be modelled and computers will be able to communicate between them across these domains without any major problem. The whole approach is based on the assumption that the only way to model a language is the language itself, leaving alone the distinction between what is formal and what is not. However, no clear of this claim has been made so far, since primitives remain undefined in this approach!

5 Conclusion

In this article, we have shown the complex network of influences between Wittgenstein, Ogden & Richards and recent research in AI. We have seen two opposite directions: 1) the belief that context and language use is fundamental and 2) the interest/need for semantic primitives seen as a set of basic units that can be used as an *interlingua*. This problem is still open

today and no answer seems to have been proposed that would solve it definitively. It is thus highly relevant to keep in mind historical research since it is highly valuable to highlight recent discussions in the literature.

Primary Sources

Firth, John R. 1957. *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Masterman Margaret. 2005 (ed.). *Language, Cohesion and Form* (ed. Y. Wilks). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ogden Charles K. & Richards Ivor A. 1923. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Ogden Charles K. 1930. *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar*. London: Paul Treber and co.

Wittgenstein Ludwig. 1922. *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (translation: C. K. Ogden).

Wittgenstein Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell (translation: G.E.M. Anscombe).

The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (translation: C. K. Ogden).

Wittgenstein Ludwig. 1973 (ed.). *Letters to Ogden, with Comments on the English Translation of the 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus'*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Secondary Sources

Buitelaar Paul, Sintek Michael, Kiesel Malte. 2005. "Feature Representation for Cross-Lingual, Cross-Media Semantic Web Applications". *Workshop on Knowledge Markup and Semantic Annotation* (SemAnnot2005), *4th International Semantic Web Conference*. Galway.

Léon Jacqueline. 2000. "Traduction automatique et formalisation du langage. Les tentatives du CLRU (1955-1960)". In *The History of Linguistics and grammatical Praxis*. eds. P. Desmets, L. Joonen, P. Schmitter and P. Swiggers. pp. 369–394. Louvain: Peeters.

Léon Jacqueline. 2007. "From universal languages to intermediary languages in Machine Translation: the work of the Cambridge Language Research Unit (1955-1970)", *History of Linguistics 2002. Selected papers from the Ninth International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences, 27-30 August 2002, São Paulo - Campinas (Brazil)*, eds. Eduardo Guimarães & Diana Luz Pessoa de Barros. p. 123–131. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Monk Ray. 1991. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. London: Penguin.

Perzanowski Jerzy. 1993. "What is non-Fregean in the semantics of Wittgenstein's Tractatus and why?". In *Axiomathes*. n°4. pp. 357–372

Wilks Yorick. "The Semantic Web: Apotheosis of Annotation, but What Are Its Semantics?". *IEEE Intelligent Systems*. n°23(3): 41–49.